

# Providence— Its Purpose and Power!

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 PHILIPPIANS 1:16
 

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*“The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel” (Philippians 1:16).*

The ordinary events of life have always amazed mortals. Man has vainly tried to explain why certain “twists” of life happen. The ancient Greeks attempted to explain these events with the mythological “Fates,” three terrible sisters named “Clotho,” “Lachesis,” and “Atropos.” Clotho spun the thread of life on her spindle; Lachesis measured the thread of life; and Atropos, Lady of the Shears, snipped the thread of life when it had been measured. The Greeks would attribute the mysterious twists of life to these “fates.” Although modern man rejects the Greeks’ myth, we still hear of one’s life being affected by “fate,” a direct reference to the myth. But explaining the mysterious turns of life by appealing to “fate,” “chance,” or “luck” is inadequate.

The poet, William Cowper, in his insane melancholy, resolved to drown himself in the Thames. He ordered a coachman to drive him to Blackfriars Bridge. Strangely enough, the man drove all around London, but because of a dense fog could not find the bridge. During the trip, Cowper’s mood changed, and he directed the driver to take him back home. When he reached his room, he took up a pen and composed the hymn that praises God’s providence, “God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform; . . .”

How do you explain life’s “twists”? The only adequate explanation is “providence.” The providence of God affects the turns and events on

earth so the Almighty’s will is accomplished. The providence of God is among the most amazing doctrines in Holy Scripture. Providence is not the suspension of natural laws or the direct intervention of God into mortal’s existence, for such belongs under the category of “miracles.” Providence is the subtle, unseen influence of God upon His creation. The impact of providence is unknown to us. A review in later years may bring it into sharp focus, though. For instance, some confess: “If I had not met that certain person when I did, I would not be preaching today. In fact, I probably would not even be a Christian!”; “If I had not stopped at a certain place to worship, I would have never met the girl I married and I would have never had a wife to encourage my missionary zeal”; “My first choice was rejected, but because of the second choice I met brother Smith who taught me God’s truth.” Who can say these events of life were not influenced by the benevolent providence of God? I believe that such is a definite possibility.

This which most dismiss as “chance” or “luck” is really providence! It is a clear demonstration of the Almighty’s benevolence and wisdom. Providence rests upon two great truths about Jehovah God. First, God is righteous in all He does (Psalms 111:3; 145:17; Jeremiah 9:24). God’s decisions and actions are always right. The second is that God’s great love for man leads Him to affect man’s life for good (Psalms 37:23). As God rules, He is aware of our most minute steps and orders life’s circumstances in such a way that we will be encouraged to follow heaven’s will (Proverbs 20:24). It is

through providence that God is able to take care of man (cf. Judges 14:4a).

One of the greatest paradoxes of Scripture focuses upon the doctrine of providence. While providence is clearly seen, it is not seen! One is hard pressed to say with absolute certainty that “providence ordered” the car’s tire to be flat; the college admission application to be rejected; the job to become available; etc. But the Christian knows that providence is working; he just does not know how it is working! For this reason, the topic of “providence” is seldom discussed but widely accepted.

Paul was a confident believer in providence. But he shared our uncertainties regarding it as well (Philemon 15). An examination of his understanding of providence will help enlighten our understanding of this great biblical doctrine.

### PROVIDENCE PORTRAYED

From a survey of Paul’s letters, we see that he was a firm believer in providence. His trust in providence is seen in numerous texts.

*Providence is strong enough to solve any difficulty (Romans 8:28; Acts 21:14; 1 Corinthians 4:19; 16:7).* Throughout his Christian life, Paul retained a trust in God’s power. When faced with adversities, he stated, “For we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). Because of his trust in providence, Paul could write the triumphant remarks of Romans 8:26ff. When faced with the greatest calamity in his life, he confidently said, “The will of the Lord be done” (Acts 21:14). Even when Paul faced imprisonment because of lies and jealousy, he saw providential control. In Philippians 1:12, 16, 19, we read about the confident trust he had in God’s providential care. The word “appointed” (Philippians 1:16) is a term that focuses on providence. It comes from the Greek word *keimai* which means “to be specially set, solemnly appointed, destined.”<sup>1</sup> Whatever difficulties arose in his life, Paul was confident that God’s strength was enough to help him endure.

In an old town was a great cathedral which had a wonderful stained glass window. Its fame had spread abroad. From miles around, people pilgrimaged to gaze upon the splendor of the masterpiece of art. One day a great storm broke the window, and it crashed to the marble floor and shattered. Great was the grief of the people who had suddenly been left bereft of its proudest

work of art. They gathered up the fragments, huddled them in a box, and carried them to the cellar of the church building. One day a stranger came who wanted to see the beautiful window. He was told of its fate. He asked what had become of the fragments and was shown the broken pieces of glass. “Would you mind giving them to me?” he asked. “Take them along; they are of no use to us,” was the answer. The visitor carefully lifted the box and carried it away. Weeks passed, and one day there came an invitation to the custodians of the cathedral. It was from a famous artist, noted for his master skill in glasscraft. It summoned them to his study to inspect a stained glass window. Ushering them into his studio, he showed them a great veil of canvas. At the touch of his hand, the canvas dropped. There before their astonished gaze shone a stained glass window which surpassed in beauty all they had ever seen. As they gazed upon its rich tints, wondrous patterns, and cunning workmanship, the artist said: “This window I have made from the fragments of your shattered window. You may take this and put it back into the cathedral.” Once more a great window shed its beautiful light into the dim aisles of the old cathedral. But the splendor of the new far surpassed the glory of the old. The fame of the window’s return filled the land.

This story well illustrates Paul’s trust in providence. He knew that in spite of hardships and difficult times, God’s providence would fashion events for a greater glory! To Paul there was no question about the matter—providence will affect one’s life so that the splendor of the new far surpasses the glory of the old!

*Providence touches even the ordinary affairs of earth’s existence.* Every day Paul was confident that God was working in the circumstances of his life to further heaven’s will. Once again the Philippian letter reveals his thoughts, “For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (2:13; cf. Philippians 2:27; Acts 14:7; 1 Thessalonians 3:11).

The Christian’s trust in providence is supported by the fact that God’s wisdom surrounds him. Everywhere we look we find God’s marvelous wisdom which touches every part of life. How sad that many are blind to the daily demonstrations of God’s providence! This blindness leads them to criticize God and forget His tender mercies toward all men.

A farmer, weary and hot in plowing, took rest under a walnut tree. He looked at his pumpkin vines and said to himself, "How strange it is that God puts such big, heavy pumpkins on such a frail vine that has so little strength that it has to trail on the ground. Then looking up into the branches of the tree, he added, "How strange it is that God puts such small walnuts on such big trees with branches so strong they can hold a man!" Just then a breeze dislodged a walnut from the tree. The tired farmer wondered no more as he ruefully rubbed his head and said, "It's a good thing there wasn't a pumpkin up there!"

The Christian is confident in trusting God's providence to touch the ordinary, everyday events of life. A wonderful calm of one's inner spirit comes when this trust is believed.

*Providence offers opportunities for erring men to obey God's will.* Paul knew it was providence that had directed his early life and religious training. This early development had prepared him for his apostolic role. Looking back over his life, Paul could confidently say that it was "through God" (providence) that he was an apostle (Colossians 1:1; 1 Corinthians 1:1; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; etc.).

It is improper to dismiss as mere "chance" the conversion of one who happened to pick up a tract and read of God's plan of redemption. Providence guarantees the fruitfulness of God's Word (Isaiah 55:10, 11). Those who are offered an opportunity to hear and obey the gospel will not be excused from eternal punishment because providence has made sure that "God is not without witness" (Acts 14:17; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9). Happy is the good heart that seizes providential opportunities to obey God's gospel!

*Providence opens the door for the furtherance of the gospel.* As Paul and Barnabas reported the events of their first missionary trip, "they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27; cf. 2 Corinthians 9:8-10; Colossians 4:3, 4).

In all situations, God is able to fashion events to affect lost souls. God's providence will "open doors" so the lost will be saved. The lost may be in the next hospital bed and would have never been introduced to the Lord's church if you had not become ill. The providential working of God may open doors for the lost to be introduced to the church by placing you in contact with the nearest

student in English class, the neighbor who has just moved into your community, or the best friend of your teenage son. Whatever the situation may be, God's providence can "open doors," and we must be ready to go through them (Revelation 3:8).

*Providence safely guides the future of everyone who trusts in God.* Paul's plans were to go to Rome (Romans 1:10). He placed his future plans in God's safekeeping (Romans 15:29, 32). Providence enabled Paul to journey to Rome, but not as Paul had first thought!

This confident trust is advised for all (James 4:15). We sing a hymn that expresses this confidence in God's safekeeping of our future—"The Lord Has Been Mindful of Me." This song explains Paul's confidence in God's guidance of the future.

## PROVIDENCE PORTRAYED PROVIDES POWER

Once we come to recognize the fact of providence in our lives, we are able to gain a greater and more powerful trust in God. This assurance equips us to stand against discouragement and will help us avoid retreat. God's providential power leads us to focus upon these lessons.

First, *the same providence that some eagerly welcome is greeted by others with bitter opposition!* We have heard the homespun wisdom, "The same sun that softens butter hardens clay." This is true with providence as well. Some confronted by providence to choose obedience or disobedience to God's will are hardened as Pharaoh, while others are softened as Saul (Exodus 4:21; Acts 26:19). The same providence was demonstrated to all Israelites as they wandered in the desert. Some were hardened while others were softened (Hebrews 3:7, 8; Numbers 14:30). The list is endless—all are confronted with the same providence. But some eagerly welcome it, and some stubbornly refuse it (Matthew 5:45; Acts 14:17).

Second, *the fact that human understanding can neither explain nor specify providence does not eliminate its existence!* The workings of God are mysterious and incomprehensible (Jeremiah 12:1, 2; Job 21:7). It is as some unknown author noted, "The ways of providence are very mysterious; things come to pass in the most inexplicable manner; but we need not be baffled thereby."

Isaiah recorded God saying, "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My

ways. . . ." (Isaiah 55:8, 9). Here is the answer to man's inability to understand providence.

Third, *the simple heart is overwhelmed with God's providential workings* (Psalms 40:5). It is amazing to consider how truly marvelous the plans and workings of God really are.

A pious farmer had a wife suffering with great pain, but he was unable to purchase the medication to ease her. His only resource was a field about to be harvested. He went to the field and began plowing and preparing for the harvest. He had taken his shoes off and placed them at the edge of the field when two mischievous youths happened by. "Let's fill them with rocks," said one. The other replied, "No, let's put this dollar in and see what he does when he finds it." They put the money in and hid. The farmer came to put on his shoes and saw the dollar. He looked to see who had placed it there and saw no one. He went to his knees with these words, "Lord, I don't know how You did it, but thank You for this dollar to go and buy my wife's medicine." This illustrates that God uses the simple to accomplish great things!

Fourth, *sincere saints find much comfort in God's providence* (Psalms 37:3, 19, 22, 23, 25, 34). The eloquent Twenty-third Psalm is a marvelous picture of providence at work.

When your life becomes confused and havoc seems to reign over every aspect of life, look back at these lessons on providence. We must learn, as Paul, to trust in providence to carry us through the perils of life (Psalms 111:3; 145:17; Jeremiah 9:24).

## CONCLUSION

Hannah was an object of God's providence. She struggled with doubt and despair but was determined to trust in God's power. Through that trust, she saw the providential hand of God (1 Samuel 2:6-9).

This is a wonderful topic! But remember—even an inspired apostle could not be certain about providence. In the case of Onesimus, all Paul could say was "perhaps" the slave's fleeing was providentially set (Philemon 15). But this uncertainty did not lessen Paul's confidence.

As you contemplate the topic of providence, remember these confident conclusions:

First, *providence does not excuse; it invites!* Some folks have a tendency to blame "God's will" or

"providential hindrances" for their disobedience to God's will. This takes them to absurd conclusions. I talked with a young lady one time about an immoral relationship she was in and the inconsistency of her acts with the Bible, and she made this ridiculous remark, "I know what the Bible says, but looking at how everything has just 'fallen into place' convinces me that it is God's will for me to continue." She failed to realize that His providence moves to open eyes to divine obedience, not to excuse disobedience!

Second, *providence does not capitulate; it conquers!* Some believe that illness or death triumphs over God and becomes the victor. But God's providence enables us to rise above the tragedies of earth and conquer all threats (1 Corinthians 10:13; Revelation 17:14).

Third, *providence does not spurn; it welcomes!* It is a haven of refuge for the perplexed. It extends hope for the forlorn through a confident trust.

Fourth, *providence does not hide; it is clearly seen!* If we look at our lives without faith, all will seem nonsense and disorder. But if we look from the proper perspective, we will find that all events fit in exact proportion, and a beautiful narrative will unfold depicting the care and consideration of Almighty God!

—John Kachelman

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup>Joseph H. Thayer (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1901; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1977, 343.

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## Providence

"Providence has at all times been my only dependence, for all other resources seem to have failed us."

George Washington

"Providence is like a curious piece of arras, made up of thousands of shreds, which single we know not what to make of, but put together they present us with a beautiful history."

John Flavel

"If you leap into a Well, Providence is not bound to fetch you out."

Thomas Fuller,  
*Gnomologia*